

White

MEMORANDUM

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TO: K. C. Yeh

FROM: Daniel Ellsberg

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF RM-6077-ARPA, "THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTIONARY STRATEGY AND THE LAND PROBLEM, 1921-1927"

COPIES TO: M. Arnsten, E. Brunner, C. Cooper, A. Hsieh, M. Palmatier, P. Schultz, C. Wolf, F. Ikle, H. Porch, W. A. Stewart

DATE: 7/15/69
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1. This is a fascinating paper; I am glad to have had the opportunity to read it, and I look forward to seeing the next two sections. It will make an excellent RM by itself. However, I would like to see a Preface that relates this chapter to the next two, preferably suggesting some of the parallels and contrasts in the subsequent periods (if Yeh has worked out his conclusions, at least roughly, at this stage) but at least indicating more fully the subject matter to come.

I look forward to this comparison with particular interest because it bears upon the thesis of Chalmers Johnson that the Maoist emphasis on land reform as a basis for peasant mobilization was not adequate or successful, not only in the period Yeh covers here but in the next period of the Kiangsi Soviet, and that it was not until the Japanese invasion that Mao found an adequate mobilizing appeal: nationalism rather than economic issues. I take it that Yeh proposes to dispute this conclusion, at least as a matter of degree, though perhaps he will conclude that the relative impact of the various appeals varied from one period to the next. This is a point I would like to see covered, or at least alluded to, in a forward-looking Preface, if that is possible. Now for some critical comments, only one of which seems significant.

2. Page 15 -- The sentence at the end of the first paragraph is not only "paradoxical" as labeled, but also puzzling. Has something been left out of it? Its relation to the accompanying text is not clear to me.

3. Page 16 -- End of first sentence "it ever had" presumably should read, "it had had earlier."

4. Page 2 -- End of sixth line: "of the" should be "into."

5. The admonition on page 38, "the importance of local communist agitation must not be over-emphasized ... the peasant movement had been largely a spontaneous development ..." and the premise on page 39, "if, indeed, the peasant movement had its own root largely independent of communist agitation ..." are rather unsettling to the

reader, who has been told only one page earlier (pp. 37-38) "Historical accounts of the movement suggest that in many localities the communist cadres had been instrumental in launching the movement ... The crucial role of communist participation at the early stage is not difficult to understand ... Because of their lack of initiative, it was necessary for the communists to provide the leadership." Perhaps the answer is that in a few areas communist leadership was critical but in most it was not. However, the words "crucial, instrumental, necessary" in the earlier passages seemed to have a more general application. Surely it would not be necessary to give the -- interesting -- interpretation (on page 38) of why communist leadership was "necessary" if one agreed with Mao's implicit evaluation (same page) that it was of negligible importance.

Indeed, Yeh goes on from Mao's evaluation to speculate on "the principle forces that drove the peasants to get organized" in a long discussion that no longer mentions communist cadres: thus casting further doubt upon the use of the term "crucial" earlier. But is this doubt entirely justified? A very important point is at issue here. When Yeh comments, "The Chinese peasants were, by nature, submissive to authority," (page 37), one wonders if Yeh is about to make a parallel comment, and perhaps a reference, to de Tocqueville's explanation of why the poorer areas of France had been less active in rebelling. (Indeed, here or later -- see below -- a citation of de Tocqueville's might be suggestive.) Ed Mitchell has, after all, recently suggested that de Tocqueville's interpretation of the determinants of rebellion in the French revolution applied also in South Vietnam: though others at Rand have questioned both his calculations and his interpretation in the case of South Vietnam. Would Yeh suggest that the French example, or de Tocqueville's interpretation, applied in China?

If, indeed, the role of the communist agitators is significant in influencing a previously sluggish and non-political peasantry -- and I find this very plausible, for both the Chinese and Vietnamese cases -- this would mean that a factor quite absent from the French case had been at work in China and Vietnam, perhaps leading to new patterns of revolt. (Mai Elliott has made this point, in conversation.) One should then investigate the distribution of communist workers among the various provinces, in looking for determinants of rebellion. Of course, one must also ask why the distribution is what it is; but I would expect a certain degree of independence between this allocation and other factors bearing upon peasant activity, though there will surely be some dependence as well. (It is in part because of this significant role of the communist cadre that I believe special attention should be given in Vietnam to a province's history with respect to previous Viet Minh administration.)

Having introduced this important consideration, Yeh should take care not to lose sight of it in later interpretations. For example, on page 51, after showing that the percentage of tenants in unions was consistently larger than the percentage of owners in unions for all localities, Yeh concludes, "the marked difference in the participation rates seems to suggest that the tenants had a higher propensity to join the peasant unions than the owners." He is forgetting here, among other possible hypotheses, the factor of cadre activity. Were cadre as likely to approach landowners and urge them to join the unions? Were their appeals as likely, in their view, to be effective with landowners; did they use as much time and effort on them? In effect, what were the criteria for allocating recruitment effort? These might have worked against landowners, quite apart from their personal attitudes or incentives.

6. Given the closeness of Yeh's discussion on pages 51 to 59 to the work of Ed Mitchell and Tony Russo, and the controversies that have arisen over that work, it seems to me obligatory that Yeh, if he has not already done so, look not only at their papers, but at discussion by Arnsten, Cooper, and Paul Schultz. It is important to Rand at this point (and to Yeh) that a new work coming out using the same methodology should show the benefit of the internal controversy surrounding these earlier papers. Methodological issues and new variables raised as important in that discussion should be addressed in this approach, and the kinds of cautions sometimes omitted in the earlier work should be made clear to the reader.

Yeh's discussion is already more cautious than that of either Mitchell or Russo, yet I think that it could still benefit by spelling out some points raised in the discussion of the earlier papers. For example, the statement on page 51, "It should be borned [sic] in mind that the observations based on these tests are highly tentative because of the crudeness of the data," is appropriate and welcome (if the syntax is improved) but I think more should be said. We have here one more case of "ecological correlation," or in more familiar terms, an aggregation problem. The data is "crude" not merely in the sense of being incomplete and imprecise, but in the sense of being highly aggregated, in a way which not only can but probably does hide significant causal relationships. For example, Yeh mentions as a "possible explanation" for sensitivity of the rate of participation in peasant unions to tenancy in Hunan, but not elsewhere, that the rate may have "depended also on Communist agitation and the relative strength of opposition from the local and provincial power groups." (page 57)

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The first possibility seems to deserve close attention, since Hunan was earlier described on page 37 as one of the "two provinces where an overwhelmingly large proportion of the graduates of the [Peasant Movement Training] Institute had been sent to work." But the data on cadre distribution is, I take it, aggregated by provinces, not by hsien. The main point is that the two possible factors cited above are only two among many that might be operating here, many of which might well suggest themselves immediately to someone more familiar with the conditions in the countryside than I (or perhaps even Yeh). This means that one is simply not entitled to make very definite inferences -- let alone draw policy implications -- from the type of data presented here, and although Yeh is careful enough in his discussion, this point deserves more spelling out for the reader.

6. Yet another variable bearing on this and other relationships that is not treated explicitly is that of income. Yeh speculates about this on page 58, but makes the crucial assertion somewhat casually: "a high tenancy ratio meant a larger proportion of the peasants in the low income group." Does Yeh have data supporting this, or is he simply assuming it (as Mitchell appeared to do, tacitly, in connection with South Vietnam). Does Yeh mean "low" within the given province, or low by national standards? Even in the former case, the proposition is not necessarily true, despite the fact that it is plausible. Russo's data appears to show that it is not true for South Vietnam, where high tenancy appears to be associated with high levels of income relative to national averages.

Yeh promises in a footnote to discuss the relation between relative income and dissidence more fully in the following chapter; the point here is that the omission of income as an explicit variable is one more important reason for great caution in interpreting his findings in this section. And it is another reason for his looking closely at the Russo and Mitchell work, and commentary on it.

7. Page 57, Footnote 1 -- This tautological bit of jargon should be omitted.

8. I note that at the bottom of page 45, Yeh gives a whole list of local factors that allegedly affected the strength of the peasant movement in various specific provinces; in two, "strong militarists' opposition;" in others, "the secret societies flourished;" in others, "the movement was slow because of lack of party support;" but "where

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opposition was relatively weak and where the communist cadres played an active, catalytic role of organizers as in Kwang Tung and Hunan, the movement advanced rapidly;" or in one, Hunan, the province ranked second in terms of number of peasant movements organized in 1926 "primarily because of the large-scale conversion of the secret society, the red spear society, into peasant unions." But the ability to explain participation on the basis of such local factors, where the relevant local factors happen to be known, throws into question any causal inferences based simply upon an observed correlation between, say, tenancy rates or income, and participation.

9. Page 41 and elsewhere: the term "mow" should be defined in terms of acres.

10. Page 47 -- I am very struck by the use of the term here and elsewhere, "local bullies." When General Thang, Minister of Revolutionary Development in South Vietnam, set the tasks for the Revolutionary Development cadre training at Vung Tau, I well remember that he prescribed two enemies for them, the communists and the "local bullies." The meaning of the latter, as distinct from the landlords (as here), was, in fact, a little obscure, though apparently meaningful to Thang and the cadres. The term occurs several times in the text here, once in a quote from Mao; I would like to see it spelled out specifically (for my own interest, as well as the reader's).

11. Another point bearing on the role of the cadre, in possible distinction from the French case, is Yeh's mention on page 47 that after months of trying unsuccessfully to organize peasants in Kwang Tung, the communist agent had made virtually no progress: "What finally aroused the peasants enthusiasm to join was several incidents that demonstrated how, as an organized group, they could defend themselves against intimidation by other groups whereas as individuals this would not have been possible. From then on membership in the union rapidly increased." Presumably the communist, if he did not himself incite the incidents that provided this demonstration, did provide the crucial interpretation of them to the peasants, a standard agit-prop technique. We have here peasant rebellion reflecting "rising expectation," as in de Tocqueville's hypothesis; but the expectations had risen not because of a recent period of rising income but because an organizer has increased the peasants' sense of power, of their ability to achieve an improvement in their lot through organization and active rebellion.

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If not in this chapter, then in later parts of the work, Yeh may want to draw together a number of aspects of his data bearing upon the de Tocqueville hypothesis and other theories of revolution.

12. The statement that land reform would provide "a new source of financing the military expenditures," is not explained, and is a little obscure. Does it mean that the peasants, once provided with land, would provide a tax base for the revolution, or would voluntarily contribute resources (as suggested at the top of page 101). This should be explained at this point.

13. Page 92 -- It is misleading to call the concluding section a "Summary" since it presents much new material. Perhaps "Discussion" would be a more appropriate heading.

14. On page 94, more attention might be drawn to the striking statement that "the experiment that failed" was "the Comintern's coalition policy ... reflected in the almost complete loss of the area and population under the direct influence of the party." In view of the strong and widely-held belief -- which might well be mentioned -- that almost no imaginable party could stand up to a coalition with Communists, the two facts here that this particular active, working coalition, first, lasted for a number of years, and second, finally ended in the near-total defeat of the Communists, deserves more comment. To be sure, the Kuomintang was in many respects organizationally similar to the Communists; but then, so was the Can Lao in South Vietnam (not to mention the Dai Viets or the VNQDD, the latter modeled directly on the Kuomintang), which scarcely imagined joining such a coalition. On page 76 there is mention of Chaing's "coup" in Shanghai; in view of the significance of this to the narrative, it should be described a bit more.

15. Since on page 98 Mao's famous statement is quoted, "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun," one senses a slight contradiction in Mao's statement quoted on the following page, "Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun will never be allowed to command the Party." Just how does the Party command the gun, if not with the barrel of another gun? Or is Mao really admitting here that "power" can derive from doctrinal, personal, or organizational factors apart from having one's finger on a trigger?